

WASHINGTON

James Reston

The Changing Guard

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A big change has come over Washington in the last few weeks. People are beginning to talk about the Reagan Administration in the past tense. The reporters are still running around like blind dogs in a meat house, but almost everybody else seems willing to leave the recent White House scandals to the investigators, the historians and the psychological novelists.

Suddenly, a lot of officials have discovered that they want to spend more time with their wives and children. President Reagan says quietly and almost enviously that he won't stand in the way of anybody who wants to go home, and a lot of people are taking him up on it.

Pat Buchanan has decided he doesn't want to run for President after all, maybe remembering that the last Buchanan we had in the White House wasn't very happy. Other official cheerleaders are packing up. The President hasn't had a news conference since the explosion, but he has a new press secretary and so does Vice President Bush. Richard Perle is leaving the Pentagon to concentrate on fiction, which is no big change.

There has been an outbreak of amnesia here since the turn of the year. Everybody agrees that something went wrong on the way to the Iranian "moderates" and the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters," but few can remember exactly what happened and those who can aren't talking.

But despite new poisonous disclosures every week, it doesn't seem to matter now whether the President knew or didn't know what Colonel North and Admiral Poindexter were up to in the basement of the White House. There is general agreement here that Mr. Reagan was deceiving Congress if not breaking the law, and that knowing or not knowing, it was a disgrace.

Everybody is embarrassed: George Shultz to discover that the White House was running a secret foreign policy behind his back; chief of staff Regan to discover he didn't know what his staff was doing; the Congress to discover that intelligence oversight committees were bypassed, and the press to discover that it had been scooped on the

biggest scandal since Watergate by an obscure magazine in the Middle East.

What hurts here is not primarily what Washington doesn't know now, but what it has known and ignored or minimized for a very long time. It has known since the beginning of this Administration that the President delegated more authority to his squabbling Cabinet and staff than any other President in memory.

Ever since the secret mining of the Nicaraguan harbors and the air raid on Libya, it has known that the Administration was engaged in covert operations without informing Congress, and was conniving with private gunrunners to arm the contras and overthrow the Government in Managua, where it maintains "diplomatic relations."

It was not, however, until it was discovered that the Administration was shipping arms to the terrorists in Iran and sneaking the profits to the contras that the whole squalid business was exposed. As one senator complained: "It was like finding that John Wayne was selling liquor to the Indians."

At first, it was thought that maybe these blunders were the result of the President's casual if not careless administrative procedures, carried out by zealots who thought they could defend democracy abroad by defying it and corrupting it at home.

It was only later when the Congress began to examine the mindless and ill-prepared Reagan nuclear arms negotiations with Mr. Gorbachev at Reykjavik that it was realized that the President's shallow knowledge of the facts and his feeble grasp of the possible consequences began to seem not only reckless but dangerous.

For a time, the Administration hoped that these mistakes would recede in memory and that the President's popularity and guileless affability would carry him through, but this has not happened — at least not yet.

The Administration still seems stunned and bewildered, not knowing quite what has happened or what may happen tomorrow as the investigations proceed under the scrutiny of a Democratic-controlled Congress.

The human tragedies are painful and the unraveling process will no doubt go on, but there are consolations. The demonstration is correcting the procedures of the National Security Council, and the Congress is reviewing the policies that have led to such deficits and mistrust at home and abroad.

Fortunately this crisis has come at the threshold of a new Presidential election campaign. Unfortunately neither Governor Cuomo of New York nor Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia will be in the race. But the people will have a chance to consider the candidates' character and experience, the procedures by which they are chosen and the regulations of the 200-year-old Constitution under which they are supposed to serve. □